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ABSTRACT

American slang reflects diversity, imagination, self-confidence, and optimism of the American people. Its vitality is due in part to the guarantee of free speech and lack of a national academy of language or of any official attempt to purify American speech, in part to Americans' historic geographic mobility. Such "folksay" includes riddles and conundrums, puns and plays on words, various kinds of jokes, sayings, proverbs, and proverbial similes, folk vocabulary and all types of slang, children's rhymes and jingles, word games, tongue twisters, and more. Folk speech is powerful language that can be rude and violent, but more often is playful, humorous, creative, lively, and ever-changing. Activities effective in learning American language through folk speech include telling jokes, riddles, and stories or reading them aloud; activities using and discussing proverbs; active and passive vocabulary learning through question-and-answer dialogues; written exercises using new vocabulary; dictionary practice and writing exercises focusing on a word and the environment it's used in; comparison of non-standard grammar or pronunciation; and humor and proverbs memorized, recited, and explained. Using folk speech in teaching is feasible for any group size or level, requires little preparation, and is stimulating and entertaining. (MSE)

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# AMERICAN STUDIES THROUGH FOLK SPEECH

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# AMERICAN STUDIES THROUGH FOLK SPEECH

> American slang reflects the kind of people who create and use it. Its diversity and popularity are in part due to the imagination, self-confidence, and optimism of our people. Its vitality is in further part due to our guarantee of free speech and to our lack of a national academy of language or of any "official" attempt to purify our speech. Americans are restless and frequently move from region to region and from job to job. This hopeful wanderlust, from the time of the pioneers through our westward expansion to modern mobility, has helped spread regional and group terms until they have become general slang[1].

Folklorist Wayland D. Hand asserts that the highest aim of the study of folklore is its possible contribution to the *integration of knowledge*[2]. Folklore is a part of the fields of anthropology, history, literature, music, art, and language; and, like American Studies, it is an interdisciplinary academic area. Scholars, collectors, and teachers of folklore see their subject as central to the humanities—as a unifyng nexus between other disciplines[3].

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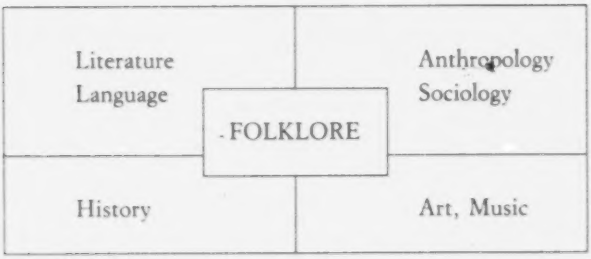
[1] S. Berg Flexner. "Introduction", *Dictionary of American Slang*, Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, comps., Thomas Y. Crowell, New York, 1960, 1975, p. viii-ix.

[2] S.E. Molin. "Lead Belly, Burl Ives, and Sam Hinton", *Journal of American Folklore* vol. 71, 1958, p. 65 (italics mine).

[3] Kenneth W. and Mary W. Clarke. *Introducing Folklore*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1963, p. 122.




In this paper, the third and last of a series on verbal folklore as an approach to American Studies[1], the focus will be on how folklore and **language** interact as an expression and definition of U.S. culture. The various types of traditional spoken lore will be described, and folk speech as a part of the study of culture and language will be examined.

The people of the United States use their peculiar language to express and identify themselves, and they can be better understood through a knowledge of their native tongue, especially in its most personal and private manifestation: *folk speech*. No American speaks the language known as standard English as found in textbooks; all speak a highly individualized version of English, no matter what their education, region, occupation, or ethnic background. Through standard English only information is communicated; folk speech completes the speech act with all its myriad of possible affective connotations. Folk speech is a group expression and, ultimately, a national expression of feelings. The proof that this language is deeply ingrained in the mind and heart is that most of the examples in this paper come from memories of over thirty years ago.

> What is called slang, therefore, might well be regarded as the poetry of everyday life, since it performs much the same function as poetry;

[1] "American Studies through Folk Songs" and "American Studies through Folk Tales" both appeared in *Messana*, numbers 2 and 11.

that is, it vividly expresses people's feelings about life and about the things they encounter in life[1].

Folk speech—also called *folksay*, a term preferred by many folklorists—is not an object like a folk song or tale but a generous category including: riddles and conundrums, puns and plays-on-words, jokes of numerous kinds, sayings and proverbs and proverbial similes, folk vocabulary and all types of slang, children's rhymes and jingles, word games, tongue twisters, and more[6]. Folk speech is powerful language that can be rude, violent, and hateful; but more often it is playful, humorous, creative, lively, and ever-changing. It is unlike other verbal folklore in that it is produced and fades out very easily. Invention rather than survival is its main characteristic. Nonetheless, people sometimes believe that they are the originators of a joke or saying that really comes from centuries ago and continents away. Strangely enough, there is more folk speech in the city than in the country, probably because urban children and adults have more free time and live closer together than their rural counterparts. In the past verbal play was important for social bonding among the pioneers, to test each other's intelligence, sense of humor, and friendliness, and as one of the rare sources of entertainment. While other types of folklore are dying out or thought to be dying out, folk speech is alive and well all over America, affected positively by the modern electronic and print media. Although in folk speech orality predominates, there is great exchange between written and verbal lore: Abraham Lincoln is said

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[1] S.I. HAYAKAWA, *Language in Thought and Action*, Harcourt Brace Jovanivich, New York 1939, 1972, p. 107.

[2] There is much interesting spoken lore that does not fit into my folk speech categories: nicknames for people and places, folk etymology, blessings and curses, onomatopoetic chants like field hollers and hog calls, play-parties, grace and bedtime prayers, superstitions and beliefs, folk poetry and limericks, bets, toasts, hoaxes and practical jokes, initiation and friendship rites, folk dramas, guessing games, street cries, and so on.

to have carried *Joe Miller's Joke Book* in his pocket throughout his presidency; *the Farmer's Almanac* has been printed every year since 1792; children retell jokes from *Boy's Life* and *Highlights*; and seniors repeat humorous stories from *Reader's Digest* and *Modern Maturity*. To illustrate the nature of American folk speech I have divided it into five categories: riddles, jokes, sayings, slanguage, and wordplay.

## Riddles

"Why is a poor riddle like a broken pencil?" (because it has no point).

A riddle is "a question or statement so framed as to exercise one's ingenuity in answering it or discovering its meaning"[1]. Riddles frequently contain comparisons between objects or animation of inanimate objects. In America, they were written, mostly in rhymed verse; they appeared in the Jack tales ("There was once a king who would give his daughter to the man who could solve his riddle..."); and they formed the plot for ballads like *The Riddle Song* ("How can there be a cherry that has no stone?"); but mainly they were of popular origin, of oral diffusion, short, and simple—though not necessarily easy!

The Opies, in their classic study, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, divide riddles into six categories[2]:

1. **true riddles:** usually questions asking the identification of an object that is described in a way that intentionally misdirects attention. They have a logical solution that the listener is meant

[1] "Riddle", *American College Dictionary*, 1960 ed.

[2] The categories are from I. and P. Opie, *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*, Oxford Univ. Press., Oxford 1959; the definitions and examples are mine.

to try to guess. "What belongs to you but is used more often by your friends than by yourself?" (your name)

2. **rhyming riddles**: simple rhymes often by or for children that require an answer and are, therefore, a form of true riddle.

> Riddle me! Riddle me! What is that:
> Over your head and under your hat? (hair)

3. **punning riddles**: a form of humor instead of a genuine guessing game, they contain a pun in either the question or the answer. The answer to these riddles is meant to be "I don't know" or "I give up", followed by a humorous response. Punning riddles and conundrums are the preferred types today. "What's black and white and red (read) all over?" (a newspaper)

4. **conundrums:** similar to punning riddles but they usually directly compare two objects. These are not translatable as true riddles are but are closely tied to the English language. "What's the difference between an engineer and a teacher?" (one minds the train and the other trains the mind)

5. **wellerisms:**[1] humorous vocabulary play in riddle form, the answer is a cleverly used word. "What happened when the farmer's wife backed up into the fan?" (disaster, i.e., dis-assed her)

6. **catch riddles:** excessively simple trick answers that make the listener feel slightly foolish. "Why did the chicken cross the road?" (to get to the other side). Catches work so well on the distracted victim that I've even caught adult English teachers with, "Which is correct: six and five *are* thirteen, or six and five *is* thirteen?"

Though the Opie's analysis of riddles is helpful, other scholars distinguish only between riddles and conundrums, that is, between guessing games and joking questions. There is a great deal

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[1] Wellerisms, named for the Dickens character Sam Weller, are not always riddles and often involve a mock quote: " 'I see', said the blind man, as he picked up his hammer and saw".

of mixing and overlapping between the categories, as in the rhyming catch riddle:

> Railroad crossing, look out for the cars!
> Can you spell that without any r's? (T-H-A-T)

The dividing line between riddles and jokes is also not clear. Often jokes are in riddle form, for example, the so-called moron jokes: "Why did the moron throw the clock out of the window"? (because he wanted to see time fly). Riddlers and jokers, of course, tell all types to keep their listeners laughing.

## Jokes

> "I don't understand why Johnny got an F in history!" his mother said to the teacher.
>
> "Well, to begin with he didn't know the date of Abraham Lincoln's death".
>
> "How could he? We don't have a television, so we didn't even know Lincoln was sick".

A joke is "A short story, especially one with a humorous punch line"[1]. Jokes, even the most nonsensical, do in some way approximate real life, especially conversations, and some even come directly from experience. The humor can be based on the situation or on the language. Here are a few classic examples:

> After a rainstorm a cowboy was riding along when he saw a man's head on the ground. "Good morning to ya", said the head. "My God, you must be stuck in quicksand, I'll get a rope!" said the cowboy. "Oh, no hurry", the head replied, "I'm standing on my horse".

> A boy walking down the road saw an old man on his porch playing checkers with his dog. "That dog must be pretty smart", said the boy. "Nah, he ain't that smart", replied the man, "I just beat him three out of five".

[1] "Joke", *American Heritage Electronic Dictionary*, 1989 ed.

"I know a sailor with a wooden leg named Smith". "Oh yeah, what's the other leg called?"

"My dog has no nose". "How does he smell?" "Awful".

There are kinds of jokes that serve a negative social function by dealing with difficult or taboo subjects:

**sick jokes**—Johnny was born without arms and legs, so his mother was surprised when, several years later, the other boys wanted to take him to play baseball. "He can't play baseball", she said. "We know", they replied, "but we need a home plate".

**racial jokes**—"How many Polacks does it take to change a light bulb?" (three, one to hold the bulb and two to turn the ladder)

**"dirty" jokes**—Willie said to Mary, "Can I put my finger in your bellybutton"? Mary gave permission. He began but right away she protested, "Willie, that's not my bellybutton!" Willie responded, "That's okay, that's not my finger either".

Each new sensitive social phenomenon breeds a new crop of humorous coping mechanisms, AIDS jokes being a recent example.

Started in the 1930s, knock-knock jokes are formula dialogs role-playing a scene of someone answering a door and asking the identity of the visitor. They use homophones to make plays-on-words, e.g., Dewey and do we, Boo who and boohoo (the sound of crying):

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Dewey.
Dewey who?
Do we have to go to school today

Knock, knock.
Who's there?
Boo.
Boo who?
What are you crying about?



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Elephant jokes are ridiculous questions and over-obvious answers of the catch riddle type. Because of their unpredictability, the listener cannot respond and accepts the role of straight-man as in the knock-knocks. Begun in schools in the early 1960s, this cycle represents a type of true children's folklore that is generally not amusing to adults. In fact my favorite collection of elephant jokes was written by a 14-year-old-boy[1]. Here are a couple of the best known:

> How do you get six elephants into a Volkswagen? (three in the front and three in the back)
>
> What time is it when an elephant sits on the fence? (time to get a new fence)

Jokes of all types are told and enjoyed by all Americans. The national sense of humor is an observatory of the national character.

## Proverbs

> "A country can be judged by the quality of its proverbs". (German proverb)

Proverbs and other similar sayings (apothegms, aphorisms, maxims, adages, proverbial similes and comparisons, folk sayings, etc.) are often referred to as "the wisdom of the people". Tens of thousands of proverbs exist that were carried to the United States by immigrants from around the world, and thousands more were made up in the new land reflecting new concerns and the pioneer mentality. The penchant for classlessness and non-specialized language caused proverbs to flourish in illiterate, semi-literate, or non-literate America. Many proverbs were taken from the most popular works

[1] R. BLAKE, comp. *101 Elephant Jokes*, Pyramid Books, New York 1964.

of literature that found their ways into frontier homes: the Bible, "Money is the root of all evil", Shakespeare, "Brevity is the soul of wit", Franklin, "Honesty is the best policy", Emerson, "Every reform was once a private opinion", almanacs, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" (from Poor Richard's Almanac), newspapers, etc. A complete popular philosophy is contained in proverbs.

Proverbs become such a part of people's lives that they influence their decisions and attitudes, both in positive ways: "never put off until tomorrow what you can do today", and with possibly negative consequences when they are followed blindly without factual verification: "starve a cold, feed a fever". Educators, lecturers, preachers, parents, etc., have the annoying habit of peppering their speech with proverbs as a way of proving their point, or as a substitute for original thought: "a stitch in time saves nine". Sometimes different proverbs are in direct contrast but may reflect two positions that can both be true: "absence makes the heart grow fonder" and "out of sight, out of mind". The veracity of proverbs is not a pre-requisite for their study as a rich linguistic expression of culture.

Archer Taylor, the major American proverb scholar, pointed out five types of proverbial phrases[1]: *proverbial comparisons and similes*, (like a bull in a china shop, as much chance as a snowball in Hell); *punny*, (as broke as the Ten Commandments, as nutty as a fruitcake); *ironical*, (crazy like a fox, as clear as mud); *proverbial comparisons based on proverbs*, (calling the kettle black, from "the pot calls the kettle black"); *similes based on colors*, (black as pitch/a raven/coal, as red as blood/a rose, as white as snow/milk/a lily). Proverbial sayings are even more common in speech than proverbs.

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[1] A. Taylor, "Introduction" of *Proverbial Comparisons and Similes from California*, Univ. of California Press, Berkeley 1954 (reprinted in *A Folklore Reader* y K. and M. Clarke, pp. 243-53).

Folk and idiomatic sayings are not so much a reflection of common wisdom as of everyday reality, often in clever figurative language. Here is a sampling of American sayings:

It's raining cats and dogs.
He's behind the eight ball.
He hasn't got the brains God gave a goose.
She always wags her tongue.
He doesn't amount to a hill of beans.
She doesn't know if she's coming or going.
They were thicker than fiddlers in Hell.
It was so noisy she couldn't hear herself think.
It was as easy as taking candy from a baby.
Hold your horses!
He looks like something the cat dragged in.

## Slanguage

> Whether the United States has more slang words than any other country . . . I do not know . . . . American, however, do *use their* general slang more than any other people.[1].

"*Slanguage*", meaning slang or folk vocabulary, is not a term of my own invention, but I appreciate it as a label and as an example. Besides standard usage, the American language in its oral form, includes: slang, jargon, dialect, tall talk, and insults and scatology.

Carl Sandburg defined slang in his own folksy way as, ". . . a language that rolls up its sleeves, spits on its hands and goes to work"[2]. Americans pick up their slang from the many ethnic, occupational, regional, age, and other sub-groups they belong to at various times in their lives. Some of the groups that contribute to slang are: immigrants (calaboose), tramps (on the skids), transportation workers

[1] Flexner, *op.cit.* p. ix.

[2] *Concise Columbia Dictionary of Quotations*, Columbia University Press, 1990.

(jerk water town), ballplayers and fans (batting a thousand), show-business people (break a leg), teenagers and college students (to ditch school), white-collar workers (pencil pusher), musicians and fans (rock 'n roll), drinkers and drug users (loose as a goose), the underworld (rat fink), the army, navy and merchant marine (gold-bricking), and so on[1].

Slang also comes from the activities of everyday life: drinking (getting juiced), sex (wrestling), describing a woman's character or physique (she's a hot tamale), money (bread), work (going to the salt mine), politics (passing the buck), trasportation (wheels), sports (he's a jock), etc. About 10 percent of our personal language is formed by slang, but it is the portion which is most frequently used[2]. A variety of linguistic processes form and modify slang through changes in meaning, form, pronunciation, part of speech, etc. While some slang becomes generally accepted like O.K. or A-bomb, most goes out of style fairly quickly: "the bee's knees" or "the cat's pajamas" both meant "excellent" in the 1920s-30s.

Jargon, which I use to include the lesser-known terms cant and argot, is "the language peculiar to a trade, profession, or other group"[3], including "that of thieves and vagabonds, devised for purposes of disguise and concealment"[4]. It is the body of slang of a limited folk-group, rarely understood by the general public. Tramps or " 'boes" rode "blinds" or "rods", drank "whiteline" or "rotgut", and ate "mulligan stew" at "jungles" or "squares" at "Sally" or "Willy"[5].

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[1] FLEXNER, *op. cit.* p. vii.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. viii.

[3] "Jargon", *American College Dictionary*, 1960 ed.

[4] "Argot", *American College Dictionary*, 1960 ed.

[5] " 'boes" = hoboes, "blinds" = traincars (*OED* 9), "rods" = bars under traincars (*OED* 9g), "whiteline" = whiskey (*OED* 4), "rotgut" = bad whiskey (*OED* 1) "mulligan stew" = stew of food scraps (*OED* 1), "jungles" = hobo camp (*OED* 2c), "squares" = square meals (*OED* 17), "Sally" = the Salvation Army (*OED* 1a) and "Willy" = Goodwill Industries offer free meals.

Dialect is a complex and fascinating study where the American language is concerned. English is said to have dialects only in extreme cases like pidgin English or the English of Jamaica, but most people use the term whenever a region or social group has a distinctive form of language. Much of the most interesting language in the United States, the speech of the folk, is, therefore, dialectal. In the southern states one might hear, "Cousin, y'all talk mighty fine-like", or in an Italian-American neighborhood, "Paisano, you speaka good da English"; in the inner city, especially New York City, one would hear, "Yo, Bro, lay some heavy rap on me", and on a California beach it might be, "Bodacious, dude, you got you some rad talk, man".

Tall talk is a type of colorful expression that is related to the tall tale in style. Americans like to make fun of people who use big words and of the words themselves. An example would be a frontiersman who, with humorous intention, says to another, "Have you the audacity to doubt my veracity and insinuate that I prevaricate?" or, "So I combobbolated on the subject and at last resisted that I would explunctificate my passions with axeltrissity". Davy Crockett was famous for his linguistically colorful brags that began, "I'm half-alligator, half-horse and a touch of snapping turtle . . ."

The last types of slang are sometimes the least welcome but the most common, that is, the language of insults, retorts, and racial slurs, vulgarity, sexual metaphor, drug and alcohol talk, etc. Derogatory slang goes from the simple insult: creep, dope, drip, goofball, jerk, sap, square, wierdo, to the strong terms used to put down sub-groups of another race: chink, jap, greaser, heinie, mick, nigger, kraut, spik, wop, honky, etc. Vulgarity can go from the crass to the picturesque: "you suck", "go take a flying fuck at a rolling doughnut". Sex and the body are often described in terms of food relating the two major sensual experiences (jelly-roll, sweetie-pie, peach, nuts). Drinking and other drug activities are described or disguised in slang. In the *Dictionary of American Slang*

there are 368 different terms meaning "to get drunk"; my favorites are "swazzled" and "pifflicated". The slang, including vulgarity (whether creative or offensive), one uses tells a great deal about a person, and by association the slang of a country tells a great deal about its personality.

## Wordplay

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me".

*Wordplay* is my term for the rhymes and jingles, verbal games and tangletalk, tongue twisters, and tricks, etc., of children. Nursery rhymes are not included as they were written by adults for children; wordplay, on the other hand, is children's own folklore.

Rhymes or "playground poetry" can be satirical, nonsensical, punning, or topical. Some serve a practical purpose, for example, jump-rope rhymes:

Cinderella, dressed in yellow,
Went upstairs to kiss her fellow.
How many kisses did she get?
1,2,3,4,5 . . . (until the jumper misses)

Rooms for rent, inquire within,
When I move out, let (Betty) move in.

or ball-bouncing, jacks-playing, patty-cake or hopscotch rhymes:

Hippity hop to the barber shop
To buy a stick of candy;
One for me and one for you
And one for sister Mandy.

Not last night but the night before,
Twenty-four robbers came knocking at my door.
I went downstairs to let them in;

They hit me on the head with a rolling pin!

Some rhymes have even more specialized uses, for example to accompany fingerplay:

This is the church,
This is the steeple;
Open the door
And see all the people.

This little piggy went to market,
This little piggy stayed home,
This little piggy had roast beef,
This little piggy had none,
This little piggy cried, "Wee, wee, wee",
All the way home.

And children use rhymes for teasing each other:

Two's company,
Three's a crowd,
Four on the sidewalk
Is not allowed.

Tattletale, go to jail,
Don't forget the ginger ale.

Finders keepers, losers weepers.

Counting-out rhymes are used as a ritual beginning to games to determine who is "it":

Eenie, meenie, minie, mo,
Catch a nigger/rabbit/tiger by the toe,
If he hollers, let him go,
Eenie, meenie, minie, mo.

One potato, two potato,
Three potato, four;
Five potato, six potato,
Seven potato, MORE.

Certainly a link to primitive societies, some rhymes are chanted because they are thought to possess some type of magic powers, as in:

Star light, star bright,
First star I've seen tonight,
Wish I may, wish I might,
Have this wish I wish tonight.

Step on a crack,
Break your mother's back.
Step on a line,
Break your mother's spine.

Rain, rain, go away,
Come again some other day.

Others are made up just for the pleasure of the sounds, as in these classics:

I scream, you scream,
We all scream for ice cream.

It's raining, it's pouring,
The old man is snoring;
He went to bed and bumped his head,
And couldn't get up in the morning.

A few are written down. Although more common in the past, sentimental rhymes still appear in yearbooks, autograph albums, and valentines, as in:

Roses are red,
Violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet,.
And so are you.

U R
2 good
2 be
4 got 10

Verbal games are frequent among young people, even in this age of computerized video toys. Tangletalk is a type of memory-taxing, non-rhyming jingle, chant, or story that children recite with great precision:

> "Why are fire engines red?"
> "Because two and two are four, two and four are six, six and six are twelve. There are twelve inches in a ruler. Queen Mary was a ruler. Queen Mary ruled the waves. Fishes swim in the waves. Fishes have fins. The Finns fought the Russians. Russians are red. Fire engines are always rushin'. And that's why fire engines are red".

Another classic type of verbal game is the endless story:

> "Pete and Repeat were out in a boat. Pete got drowned. Who was left?"
> "Repeat".
> "Pete and Repeat ..."

Tongue twisters are, ". . . traditional routines of speech play which may sometimes result in embarrassment, or a display of performance incompetence on the part of the person attempting to pronounce difficult sequences of words"[1]. They are also called tongue tanglers, tongue tippers, tongue ticklers, in Britain jawbusters, and in the South cramp words. The following are well-known examples (the shorter ones being repeated as many times as possible):

> Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked. If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?
>
> Black bug's blood.
>
> Fuzzy Wuzzy was a bear. Fuzzy Wuzzy had no hair. Fuzzy Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy, was he?

[1] M. JORGENSEN. "The Tickled, Tangled, Tripped, and Twisted Tongue: A Linguistic Study of Factors Relating to Difficulty in the Performance of Tongue Twisters", *New York Folklore*, v7 n 3-4, Winter 1981, p. 67.

Sally sells sea shells at the seashore.

I slit a sheet, a sheet I slit. Upon a slitted sheet I sit. (making the speaker pronounce the taboo word "shit")

Of all the saws I ever saw I never saw a saw saw like the saw I saw down in Arkansas saw.

Rubber baby buggy bumpers.

Toy boat.

How much wood would a woodchuck chuck
If a woodchuck would chuck wood?
He would chuck what wood a woodchuck would chuck,
If a woodchuck would chuck wood.

Tricks can be a type of catch riddle, but they are also related to jeers, torments, and mild verbal abuse.

If you would like to join the secret society, the Royal Order of Siam, just bow five times and repeat these Siamese words: OWHA TANAS SIAM! (O, what an ass I am!)

I bet I can make you say "black".
No you can't.
What are the colors on the American flag?
Red, white, and blue.
I told you I could make you say "blue".
No, you said I'd say "black".
You just did.

Adam and Eve and Pinch-me
Went down to the river to bathe.
Adam and Eve got drownded,
Which one of the three was saved?

No matter how uncouth schoolchildren may outwardly appear, they remain tradition's warmest friends. Like the savage, they are respecters, even venerators, of custom; and in their self-contained community their basic lore and language seems scarcely to alter from generation to generation[1].

[1] OPIE, *op. cit.* p. 2.



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All Americans were children. All Americans taunted each other with, "Liar, liar, pants on fire, hanging on the telephone wire!" Not all the folk speech of children is universal throughout the English-speaking world or even throughout the United States, but there are certain items of folk speech that are the common heritage of every American because they are part of the world of every child.

As children grow up, they become members of various folk-groups, each with its own language. Occupational groups frequently create specialized jargon, from the loggers, sailors, cowboys, railroaders, miners, and longshoremen, to the office workers, university employees and students, politicians, scientists, military personnel, police officers, criminals, entertainers, athletes, and advertisers. Each ethnic group also has its own language, even when it is English. Terminology related to their traditions or foreign words used together with English are an important part of the cultures of the Jewish, Armenian, Basque, Italian, Finnish, Norwegian, and many other peoples, particularly of those groups in some way reluctant to assimilate: Pennsylvania Dutch, Amish, Mexican-American, Asian, Creole, Hawaiian, etc. African-American oral lore may be the richest of all[1].

Teaching American culture both at home and abroad presents opportunities and difficulties as numerous as the various facets and elements of the culture itself. History is not enough to give the learner a feel for the life of the ordinary people; neither is literature, nor art, nor sociology. All of these and more are certainly essential to understanding the American character, but without the study of the common authentic language the picture is not complete.

Modern linguistics studies teach us, among other things, that:

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[1] For more on African-American folk speech see: *Talk that Talk*. L. Goss and M.E. Barnes (eds.), *Talking Black*. R. Abrahams, *Talkin and Testifyin: The Language of Black America*. G. Smitherman.

1. Language changes constantly.
2. Change is normal.
3. The spoken language is the language.
4. Correctness rests upon usage.
5. All usage is relative[1]

If this is true then the maximum attention must be paid by all language students to the oral form of the people's vernacular.

Activities that can be effective in learning the American language through folk speech include: telling or reading aloud jokes, riddles, and stories; completing, comparing, analyzing, translating, collecting, illustrating, and discussing proverbs—showing the uniqueness of their social, cultural, ethnological and historical backgrounds and the relevancy of their "truths"; stylistic analysis or essay writing based on proverbs; active and passive vocabulary learned through question and answer dialogs presented in pairs; various written exercises using new vocabulary in an essential context like riddles; dictionary practice and writing exercises focusing on a word and the environment it is used in and then using the word in context; comparison study of non-standard grammar or pronunciation; riddles, jokes, proverbs, or rhymes memorized, recited, and then explained, and so on.

Using folk speech in teaching has many practical advantages. It is feasible for large groups, small groups, pairs, and individuals; it can be simple for lower-level students, for example, learning rhymes, or more complex for higher-level students, for example, discussion on the veracity and relevancy of sayings. There is little or no preparation required as exercises are easily devised, for example, learning ten proverbs or riddles one lesson, then cutting them in half and matching them the next lesson, even as a team game. Students can choose the items they prefer to study; there is no shortage of material.

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[1] I.M. and S.W. Tiedt. *Contemporary English in the Elementary School*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1967, p. 16.

The advantages of using folklore in education are not only practical or topic-related. Folk speech is stimulating, challenging, and entertaining. Learners experience the joy of discovery and the desire to share the riddles, jokes, rhymes, etc., that they have learned, in other words—to communicate. Humor does not always translate between cultures and languages, but it is intrinsically motivating, a primal tie to a common human emotional self.

> Ineptly used, folk speech, like other forms of communication, may result in cliché-ridden, uninspiring utterances. In the expression of an intelligent, articulate person it seasons and delights, reflecting his easy familiarity with the most intimate reaches of native idiom[1].

Along with crafts, food, costumes, dance, and all that which makes up the traditions of the people, language defines Americans, in particular the distinctively local and intimate folk speech. To know the country is to have an understanding of how real people live and communicate, not merely superficial or stereotyped ideas about Yanks. American Studies means listening to the authentic Voice of America - folk speech.

> The Westerner rarely "died". Nor was the problem of death a matter about which he talked other than casually. Of cowboys, it was said that they *had gone over the Divide, gone West* or *gone over the range*. Miners had *thrown dirt from the last ditch* or *gone up the flume*. They *gave up the game for good, passed in their checks, played their last cards*, or *drew to the spade*. More simply, it was said of a man that he *turned on his back* or *went under*. They often succumbed to *galena poisoning* or *lead poisoning*. The funeral service was a *send-off* and the burial itself a *planting*[2].

E. Martin Pedersen

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[1] CLARKE and CLARKE, *op. cit.* p. 91.

[2] D. EMRICH. *It's an Old Wild West Custom*. The World's Work, Kingswood, England, 1951, pp. 139-40.